

## **A Eulogy to Geoff Shelton**

Geoff Shelton. So many things to so many people. Friend, uncle, brother, husband to his beloved Anne, colleague, comrade at arms, neighbour. And a vibrant storyteller. And a true gentleman.

I was privileged to know Geoff in his later years, and in those years he became a very dear friend. I can't do him justice in just a few minutes, but let me try. You all have your own memories of Geoff.

My bond with Geoff lay on the not so distant shores of Russia, and most of our time together involved Russia in some way or another.

Whilst I have come to love that country over the course of just 34 years, Geoff's love for Russia and for the Russian people stemmed from experiences forged 40 years earlier, and at a time of unimaginable hardship. He joined the forces as soon as he turned 18, and immediately found himself on a ship destined for Russia. The Arctic Convoys, described by Churchill as the worst journey on in the world.

Attacked by enemy aircraft, ships and submarines, and constantly battling the elements.

Russia became for two long years Geoff's reason to live.

And his reason to die.

Geoff never forgot the friendships.

Russia loved Geoff in return. After the war, Geoff visited Russia many times over the years, and was proud to wear the prestigious Ushakov Medal, pinned personally to his chest by the Russian Consul General himself.

The book "Cold Seas and Warm Friendships", a commemorative tartan, and a special edition malt whisky were commissioned by the Consulate, and demonstrate that Russia had not forgotten these men and women. Geoff described this bond with Russia as a golden thread, never to be severed. Indeed, Geoff was an Honorary Officer of the Russian Naval Severny Flot.

Which is why, as the Russian Aircraft Carrier Admiral Kuznetsov steamed through the English Channel en route to the Mediterranean, perfectly legally but to the indignation of the readership of the Daily Mail, Geoff suggested maybe he should be on her deck. “That would annoy the British Government” I recall him saying, with his trade mark twinkle in his eye.

Some years ago, we invited Geoff, along with David Craig and Austin Byrne, two friends and fellow Veterans, to address a conference. The Moderator was the BBC’s Bridget Kendall. She was utterly unable to moderate the three Veterans, who took over the event with their incredible tales and tributes. On that day, grown men and women, business people, company directors, wept publicly.

In 2015, The Russian Consul General kindly invited Geoff to attend the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day in Moscow.

Geoff invited me as his chaperone & interpreter, which was a massive privilege. The manner in which the Russian hosts treated Geoff and his fellow veterans was in itself very moving.

They could not have been more generous in their treatment.

Seated at the Parade, beside the world leaders, our Veterans had the most wonderful spectacle laid out before them. After the parade, young Russian servicemen were clasping the Veterans' hands and thanking them for their war achievements. The Veterans were deeply, deeply moved. Later in the day, during a banquet in the Kremlin, Geoff asked me to speak to the Russian Air Force Officer seated beside me, to enquire whether a meeting with President Putin might be possible. Whilst choking on his bread roll, the officer politely but vigorously exclaimed that this was several levels beyond the impossible, being against every protocol in the book. Geoff graciously accepted this response.

I thought that was the end of that. How wrong I was! When the chairs scraped back to signal the end of the meal, Geoff grabbed his walking stick, and, leaving me and the Officer well behind, made a beeline for the President's security entourage. I tried but failed to maintain my position beside him; I just couldn't keep up.

And so it was that Geoff found himself face to face with the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. There followed a brief, positive and gracious conversation between the two men before the President shook Geoff's hand, and thanked him for his part in the war. It was very powerful. Recently, whilst visiting Geoff in hospital, I was recounting to our girls, how Geoff had met the Russian President. "No" Geoff corrected me, "the Russian President met me!"

Geoff liked to talk about his memories, and attended many commemorative events in Russia, and in the UK. That same year, as a guest of the Russian Consulate on the Royal Yacht Britannia, Geoff was asked to say a few words.

A sombre account on the topic of war? No. Instead, a slightly risqué story of an episode in Greenock during the war, followed by a spontaneous 1940's singsong with the Veterans. Geoff later said that was a far more evocative way of recreating the war years than melancholy.

Russia's many, many acts of remembrance over many, many years gave Geoff and all the other Veterans a sense of purpose and a dignity, that was of immense importance to them. You made them feel special. For that we all thank you.

Of course, Geoff was not only an ex Serviceman. He loved to tell stories of his subsequent years in the insurance industry, and how he uncovered various false claims and scams. He could become quite indignant whilst he was telling these stories, despite the passage of time!

He also wrote a book about his many exploits on his little yacht on the south coast.

The stories of Baladin are of course humorous. But they also demonstrate quite accidentally, that he was a brave and adventurous man.

Towards the end of his life, Geoff suffered from ill health, and eventually could no longer stay in his own home. I recall visiting him in hospital on Christmas Day, when we asked if there was anything he needed. His response was unexpected. "Frankly, David, I would very much like a beer if I could just get hold of one".

Well, minutes later Geoff was not only enjoying a cold beer, but I suspect also enjoying the fact that he was almost certainly breaking some rules. That then became a tradition at the hospital. Which I have only just now admitted.

Towards the end, Geoff was just ready to take his leave. He didn't like being in hospital at all. He didn't like being ill. He knew he had a wonderful support network. His family were with him every day, and there was a constant stream of visits and gifts from friends, from neighbours, other veterans and of course, from the Russian Consulate. He was admired and respected. And he was loved.

When my wife, Lorraine once asked Geoff if he ever felt lonely, Geoff touched her arm and said "My dear, I have all my memories. How could I ever be lonely?"

In the last few minutes, whilst I have been speaking, friends, Russian, British and Canadian, much like the crews of the Convoys, have been lighting candles.

So as we remember Geoff here, candles are now lit here in Glasgow's Russian Orthodox Church, but also across Russia, in the cities of Irkutsk, Samara, Moscow, Saint Petersburg and in the Naval Cathedral in Kronstadt.

As Geoff used to say: "There is far, far more that ties us together than separates us".

That is what we should focus on.

We have all been left richer for having met this great and humble man. May he rest in peace.